

Generation Y dental students' education: real-time and interactive

As dental educators, we have a responsibility and significant role to shape the next generation of dental professionals. Teaching dental students the theoretical and practical merit of dentistry has always been a challenging task due to the need to gain strong background knowledge, acquire manual skills, and learn how to combine the two in a professional and ethical manner.

The terms "Generation Y" and "Millennials" refer to the cohort of the population born between the early 1980s and early 2000s. As such, it is the generation of today's dental students and it is known to be characterized by active communication, especially through social media and digital technologies. They are "social buffs," often hooked to social media constantly. This generation was described in Time magazine as the "Me, me, me" generation.¹ As this generation is considered to be more self-centered and often uses social platforms for communication along with exploiting "Dr Google" for professional information, the education system might need to make some extra effort to gain valid status, trust, and recognition in the eyes of the students. It's not like in older times, as in the famous paintings of Socrates, with the student gazing into the teacher's eyes to maximize the information to be learned from the mentor; today as instructors, lecturers and teachers, we frequently see a classroom full of laptops and mobile devices facing us.

Although educating Generation Y dental students brings some unique challenges, their distinctive characteristics create new opportunities and open interesting doors that could enhance and improve teaching and learning over time.

Taking time at the first encounter with the class to state who you are as a person, teacher and professional, sharing how you got to this point, professionally and personally and, maybe, disclosing some extracurricular interests, will make you, as a teacher, more approachable to your students. It will also draw their attention, increase their interest, and inspire and feed their curiosity. This will not only open a route for future communication to enhance learning, but also improve the chances that the students might choose the information, data and opinions you suggest over what they can find in a simple Google search.

Additionally, this generation is known to be "emotionally charged," looking to have a purpose, and willing to contribute to saving the world; therefore, passive sitting in a classroom while listening to a lecture might not be the most preferable approach to gain their attention. One practical way to create a relationship and participation within a classroom full of Generation Y students might be using interactive survey tools, such as the free poll tools that are available online, to create an active discussion, even in a large class. The discussion can be further enriched by presentation of clinical cases, taking advantage of today's high-resolution photographs, microscopic images, or videos, allowing the students to take an active part in decision-making regarding a case and then see the long-term follow-up results of the treatment they have voted on during the discussion. The interactive survey tool not only creates active communication with the students, but also allows the educator to probe students' knowledge in real-time with the possibility to adjust teaching on the spot if a gap is identified.

Generation Y students are also described as "tech geeks" who enjoy the latest gadgets, and nowadays there are many apps and websites available to provide professional concise information. This might be a double-edged sword, however, so prior to using these numerous possibilities, it is important to remind and teach them about the "do no harm" oath we took, and to provide them with basic fundamental tools to assess the knowledge they find on the web. The "level of evidence" pyramid should be the guiding reference for decision-making. Despite their availability and relative ease of use, one should remember these resources cannot usually be used as a primary source of learning.

As educators, we have the privilege and responsibility of shaping the next generation of dental professionals, and we should take advantage of teaching Generation Y dental students, using the various resources available to enhance learning. It might be challenging for us to keep on track with the rapidly progressing technological world, but it could also be an exciting and joyful journey for us and our students. It is import-

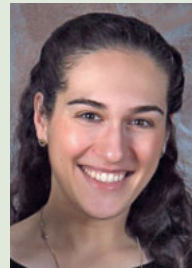
ant to keep in mind, however, that these tools should only be used as an addition and support, and do not replace in-depth understanding of the different topics. Together with education for critical thinking and continuous life-long learning, it is possible to avoid the shortcuts and superficial learning that would be based only on social media and the opinions of peers. ■■

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Reference

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